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FORGIVENESS

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 6:37-42

"...do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."
Luke 6:37b (NRSV)

In Terry Anderson's memoirs of his seven years in captivity as a hostage, *Den of Lions,* there is a wonderful, ongoing account of his return to his faith. After four months of captivity, during which time he was mostly alone, chained often to a cot in a series of dark, damp rooms, often blindfolded, he found himself thinking a lot about religion. Among the few other hostages are two clergy, The Reverend Ben Weir, a Presbyterian Pastor/Missionary, a Catholic Priest, Father Martin Jenko. When Anderson realizes Jenko is a Priest, he asks his captors for the privilege of seeing him privately to make his confession.

Let me read Anderson's account:

> "Cautiously, I raise my blindfold. Father Jenko, a white-haired man with a full beard and a gentle smile, is sitting cross-legged. We clasp hands. 'I'm Martin Jenko.'
>
> "'Hi, Father. I'm Terry Anderson. I don't know where to start. It's been a very long time since I said confession.'
>
> "'It doesn't matter. Just go ahead.' He nods in encouragement."

For twenty minutes they talk about Anderson leaving the church years before, about the time he was an agnostic but still felt like a Catholic, about his divorce. Mostly, Father Jenko just listens and offers him assurances.

Anderson reflects on the experience:

> "For a Catholic, ritual confession is an emotional ceremony, no matter how informal the setting. This was my first confession in twenty-four years, my first formal step back into the church. I'd spent months wrestling with myself, months lying chained to a cot with nothing to do but examine myself, study the Bible, and try to deal, alone, with my anger, frustration, remorse. This smiling, soft-spoken Priest, also a hostage, dressed like me in white cotton shorts and T-shirt, frightened in his own pain and anger, received the full flood of my emotions, guilt, and concerns, returning warmth, love, and understanding.
>
> "By the end of our conversation, the bare floor around us is littered with crumpled tissues. Both he and I are crying. Finally I kneel beside him. 'Father, forgive me, for I have sinned in word and thought, in what I have done and what I have not done.'
>
> "He rests his right hand lightly on my head. 'In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are forgiven.' He pulls my head gently to his shoulder and hugs me. We sit back and look at each other. In a few moments, we hear the guard turning the lock on the door and we pull our blindfolds down over our eyes." [*Den of Lions,* pp. 97, 98]

What a remarkable exchange — remarkable that at this critical moment, not knowing when he would ever be free, not knowing whether he would live or die, what Terry Anderson wanted most, needed most, was to hear the ancient assurance of God's forgiveness and acceptance and grace. Remarkable also that this Priest, himself subject to the same threat and uncertainty, separated from all the paraphernalia of his ecclesiastical office, sitting in his shorts and T-shirt, could still presume to say those astonishing words — "In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are forgiven."

It is either the most preposterous — or the most magnificent — moment in this weekly ritual of worship when we all say — "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." We let the choir sing the response: "Praise ye the Lord. The Lord's name be praised!" But if there was ever a moment to jump up and cheer, throw your hat in the air and dance in the aisle... "Hear the Good News... In Jesus Christ we are forgiven," is surely it.

This is a sermon on the topic of forgiveness. It grows out of the text. It also grows out of an ongoing conversation I have with Dr. Thomas Schemper, Director of the Lorene Replogle Counseling Center. Dr. Schemper is a clinical psychologist and while the sermon is mine and you must not hold him accountable for what I say, Tom and I do regard the topic of forgiveness as a critical one, perhaps the most critical one both in terms of the essential meaning of the Christian faith and also in terms of human relationships; a topic germane to our spiritual lives, and also to the exhilaration and agony of our relationships — all of them.

The first question, at least theologically, is "forgiven for what?" In the Lord's Prayer we Presbyterians say "forgive us our debts..." Most other churches say "trespasses." Someone quipped that Presbyterians alone say debts rather than trespasses because apparently Presbyterians would rather have their debts paid than their sins forgiven.

We're not terribly comfortable with the concept of sin.

Garrison Keillor wrote a funny essay on "The Current Crisis in Remorse" in which he targeted a hypothetical major Protestant denomination for desecrating the Prayer of Confession by removing from it all guilt or guilt-oriented references:

> "Lord, we approach Thy throne of Grace, having committed acts, which we do heartily acknowledge, must be very difficult for Thee to understand. Nevertheless we do beseech Thee to postpone judgment and to give Thy faithful servants the benefit of the doubt until such time as we are able to answer all Thy questions fully and clear our reputations in heaven." [*We Are Still Married*, p. 24]

Forgiven for what? I suppose the theological, liturgical question we ministers are asked more than any other has to do with Confession — The Prayer of Confession in worship. Why do I have to confess to things I don't think I did last week? It was a very busy week. I didn't have enough time to commit any sins. Maybe someone was mean to their neighbors, greedy, hostile, and exploited the environment, and the oppressed, the poor, but all I could manage was to get to work on time and grab a sandwich in the evening.

Generally, our theology of forgiveness is mechanical. Do something wrong: tell a little white lie, be mean, say you're sorry, get forgiven. And if that's all there is to this business, the Prayer of Confession is an empty ritual. There is, of course, more than that. Our theology begins with the assumption that there is a gap between God and ourselves, a gap between what God wants us to become and what we actually are, which is part of the human story from the beginning; a gap between our potential and our reality. And our theology assumes that the separation between God and ourselves is because of our selfishness, and further that it is reflected in a state of separation and alienation, and sometimes hostility toward other people. The term for the gap is sin. It's not as if we believe that everyone does a lot of bad things, a lot of little sins every week and that feeling guilty is the appropriate religious sentiment. What we believe is that each of us is involved in this gap and each of us does have a part in this human condition and that each of us needs to hear the words of forgiveness. But most of all, what we believe is that it is the nature of God to be merciful and kind and forgiving: that God's forgiving comes before we get around to sinning, that God's mercy and kindness and grace and forgiveness are precisely what makes us aware of our shortcomings, the distance between God's hopes for us and the actuality of our lives — what we believe is that it is God's forgiveness that makes it necessary for us to ask for it, confess our need for it.

Luke reports that Jesus said it plainly and simply,

> "Forgive and you will be forgiven."

It follows those wonderfully enigmatic words of his about loving your enemy and turning the other cheek, words and ideas which signal a whole new code of personal behavior based not on retaliation and revenge, reciprocal morality, but instead on mercy and forgiveness.

It is there, in his religious tradition, and ours, from the beginning. Primitive religion focused on God's power and mystery. The genius of Judaism was in perceiving that God is essentially merciful, that when God and human beings have to do with one another they meet at a place called a mercy seat, not a judgment seat. And, furthermore, when human beings encounter the one with whom each of us ultimately has to do, it is a moment not of judgment and terror, as religion all too often characterizes it, but grace, forgiveness, and reunion.

> "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you." [Psalm 130: 3, 4]
>
> "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more." [Jeremiah 31:34b]

It is so good, we can't believe it. The history of our religion is the story of people trying to attach conditions to God's grace creating rules and regulations, restrictions to keep people out, purity and orthodoxy barriers to assure that only the good and pure make it ... "Forgive," Jesus said, "and you will be forgiven."

It is the intent of God that we not be separated, alienated from God — or from one another. There is only one condition attached to God's forgiveness and that is your forgiveness of others.

That's the dynamic that interests the psychologists and theologians when they get together. In an article in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology,* "The Role and Function of Forgiveness in the Psychotherapeutic Process," Dr. Jared Pingleton observes that "Forgiveness is simply giving up one's right to hurt back." It is a process; it involves acknowledging the wrong done and the pain experienced, the loss of self-esteem, and then the intentional reversal of the natural inclination to strike back. It is not easy. It is very hard work. But it can be done. Although it is difficult not to be skeptical.

Two people who have done it and written about it are popular authors, Hugh Prather and Gayle Prather. They are married and, in a remarkable little diary, *Notes to Each Other,* they reflect on their experience, including betrayal and infidelity, which often presents the one event many people cannot work through or around, let alone forgive.

> "There are very few mistakes that are humanly possible for a couple to make that we have not made," they write.

And then this remarkable entry:

> "We have included our personal struggles in this area as an aid to those going through similar difficulties because we have seen so many couples throw their hands up over less protracted incidences of betrayal than ours."

With complete candor they discuss how difficult it is to apologize for any offense — because it feels like giving into another person, giving something away. Almost as difficult as letting go of the need to see the other as guilty. "I must remain living proof of what you have done. I must cherish the damage you have caused me and hold tightly to it — for how else will the world stay reminded of your sin."

The Prathers suggest a touching device for help with the hard work of forgiveness. Keep a picture in your wallet or an imaginary picture in your mind of the person you want to forgive — as a child, as a five-year-old, or eight, or ten, a picture of the time when she or he was innocent, a reminder of the deep core of innocence inside each one of us.

The Prathers are still together and are determined that nothing will prevent them from staying together. They write,

> "There is no more powerful, far-reaching, or efficient means of healing than forgiveness, and yet the concept is generally misunderstood. Forgiveness is not a posture of superiority or the decision to behave in certain 'forgiving ways.' Forgiveness does not condone the past nor does it commit one's self to the future.... Forgiveness occurs in the present only. It is my willingness to change my mind from a thing that tortures me into a presence that comforts and befriends me. Again and again, I must pull my thoughts away from the contemplation of my guilt or yours, back to the deep core of innocence-that shines within you ... and this is an effort that must be repeated infinitely until the soul is healed."

It is a possibility for all of us, regardless of how we have offended or been offended for the simple reason that we live within the steadfast love, the kindness and forgiveness of the one who made us.

It is stunning when it happens.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, who was dealt what easily could have been a fatal blow to his vocation and service to the Church he loves, forgave his accuser, visited him, talked with and prayed with him. It was one of the most eloquent examples of the new reality Jesus proclaimed that I have ever seen.

In a feature article on forgiveness *Time* magazine offered this thoughtful analysis:

> "The case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned in the past by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield one's self to another's control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other's initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and response, of outrage and revenge, escalating always. The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver."

You are invited to open your heart and soul to a forgiveness that has already been given. It is yours for the asking. It becomes yours as you acknowledge it and sing doxologies to God because of it. It is yours as your forgiveness, already given by a kind and merciful God, begins to work in your life to make you more loving, and merciful, and forgiving.

That is the blessed promise.

Forgive and you will be forgiven. Thanks be to God.

Amen.